



Special Olympics International & The International Paralympic Committee

What's the Difference?

Special Olympics and the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) are two separate organizations recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Both are international non-profit organizations focusing on sport for athletes with disabilities. Special Olympics and the Paralympics differ in three main areas: 1) the disability categories of the athletes they serve, 2) the criteria and philosophy under which athletes participate, and 3) the structure of the organizations.

THE ATHLETES

Special Olympics welcomes all athletes with intellectual and developmental disabilities, (ages 8 and older) of all ability levels, to train and compete in over 30 Olympic-type sports. To be eligible to participate in Special Olympics, athletes must have an intellectual disability, a cognitive delay, or a development disability, that is, functional limitations in both general learning and adaptive skills. Additionally, Special Olympics Young Athletes is an early childhood play program for children with and without intellectual disabilities, ages 2 to 7 years old, that introduces basic sport skills, like running, kicking, and throwing.

The IPC welcomes athletes from six main disability categories: amputee, cerebral palsy, intellectual disability, visually impaired, spinal injuries, and Les Autres (French for "the others", a category that includes conditions that do not fall into the other categories). To become eligible to participate in the Paralympic Games, athletes must fulfill certain criteria and meet qualifying standards.

SPORTING PHILOSOPHY

Special Olympics believes deeply in the power of sports to help all who participate to fulfill their potential and organizes athletes into divisions for fair competition against others of like ability. For Special Olympics athletes, excellence is personal achievement, a reflection of reaching one's maximum potential. Special Olympics uses the power of sport as a catalyst for change for people with intellectual disabilities to ultimately create a more inclusive world.

Participation in the Paralympic Games is based on sport-specific criteria and standards determined by the IPC Sports Chairpersons, the Sports Technical Delegates, and international sports organizations. The Paralympics are about elite performance sport, where athletes go through a stringent qualification process so that the best, or highest qualified based on performance, can compete at the Games. Additionally, by encouraging participation from diverse athletes and countries, the movement strengthens social inclusion and empowers the lives of persons with disabilities, showcasing that the journey begins with the courage to start.

STRUCTURE

[Founded in 1968](#), Special Olympics is a global movement to end discrimination against people with intellectual disabilities. We foster acceptance of all people through the power of sport and programming in education, health and leadership. With over four million athletes and Unified Sports® partners and one million coaches and volunteers in 200 countries, Special Olympics delivers more than [30 Olympic-type sports](#) and nearly [50,000 games and competitions every year](#).

The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) is the global governing body of the Paralympic Movement and is based in Bonn, Germany. Founded on 22 September 1989 as a non-profit organization, the IPC aims to be athlete-centered and membership-focused in all endeavors. Working with 200 plus member organizations, Paralympics use Para sport as a vehicle to advance the lives of the world's 1.2 billion persons with disabilities. The work of the Paralympic Movement has a transformational impact on society. A strong belief that Change Starts with Sport motivates the international workforce to work as one team.